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***The Persuasion of Form:  
A Rhetorical Analysis of Pr. 31:10-31***

Although in the past scholars have maintained that the structure of Pr. 31:10-31 seems disjointed and somewhat haphazard,<sup>1</sup> more recent scholarship has gravitated toward seeing intentional structure in the pericope.<sup>2</sup> A rhetorical analysis has revealed an intentional structure that demonstrates the blessing that the Woman of Strength is to those who are associated with her-especially her husband.<sup>3</sup> In the first, third, and fifth stanzas of this five-stanza poem, the Woman of Strength functions as a “garland of grace” or a “crown of beauty” upon her husband (Pr. 4:9). Even the structure of the entire poem demonstrates how the wife “surrounds” her husband. Since the original intended audience of the Book of Proverbs was probably young men,<sup>4</sup> the idea that the Sage Poet would demonstrate the blessing that this wife is to her husband

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<sup>1</sup>The following scholars saw the acrostic pattern as the cause of this supposed jagged nature: Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1899), 542; William McKane, *Proverbs*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 665-66; and Roger N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: University Press, 1972), 184.

<sup>2</sup>Murray Lichtenstein, “Chiasm and Symmetry,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982): 202-11; Thomas P. McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife,” *Revue Biblique* 92 (1985): 25-46; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 247-48; and Thomas R. Hawkins, “The Meaning and Function of Proverbs 31:10-31 in the Book of Proverbs” (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), 57-58.

<sup>3</sup>McCreesh noted that the woman is so prominent in the poem that the role of every other character is correspondingly reduced. He stated that “everyone is served, helped, and ministered to by the wife.” McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife,” 28. The rhetorical structure of Pr. 31:10-31 supports McCreesh’s assertion.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 248.

is feasible. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the rhetorical structure of Pr. 31:10-31 is arranged in such a manner so as to highlight the husband of the Woman of Strength, thus attempting to persuade young men to seek such a woman for a life-long companion. The five-stanza arrangement of this acrostic poem shows the husband to be present in the first, third, and fifth stanzas--the beginning, the middle, and the end. Although the Woman of Strength is most definitely the focal character in the poem, the structure of the poem seems meticulously arranged so that the reader can see the blessing that she is to her husband, and to her family as well. Various rhetorical and lexical devices also hearken back to Proverbs 1, 8, and 9 where Lady Wisdom graces this biblical book thereby emphasizing that the Woman of Strength embodies a great many qualities of wisdom.

One of the preeminent scholars concerning Pr. 31:10-31, Al Wolters, gave the following outline.

1. Introduction (10-12)
2. The Deeds of the Woman (13-27)
3. Call to praise the Woman (28-31)<sup>5</sup>

Although Wolters approached the pericope as a heroic hymn, his outline has merit for any approach to the text of Pr. 31:10-31. With further division of his second section, a rhetorical analysis of this pericope has revealed basic agreement with Wolter's outline.

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<sup>5</sup>Al Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form Critical Analysis," *Vetus Testamentum* 39 (1988): 449. Wolters gleaned from Gunkel that a heroic hymn has three basic sections: (1) an introduction, which announces the praise to be given, (2) the body, or the *Hauptstück*, which enumerates the praiseworthy deeds of the person being heroicized, and (3) the concluding exhortation, in which the poet elicited the audience to join him or her in praise.

**Stanza 1** Blessing for the husband of the Woman of Strength (10-12)

**Stanza 2** Description of the Activities of the Woman of Strength (13-20)

**Stanza 3** Blessing for all associated with the Woman of Strength (21-25)

**Stanza 4** Description of the Activities of the Woman of Strength (26-27)

**Stanza 5** Blessing of Praise for the Woman of Strength (28-31) Both the rhetorical structures and the themes present within this pericope justify this outline.<sup>6</sup>

### **Stanza 1 (Pr. 31:10-12)**

After an introductory rhetorical question,<sup>7</sup> verse 10 reveals that the worth of a Woman of Strength is far above jewels.<sup>8</sup> Due to the use of the rhetorical question, verse 10 has no clear, parallel poetic structure; however, the verse has a prefatory function before the husband is mentioned. When verse 10 is coupled with verses 11 and 12, which mention her husband, the idea that the reader will seek an intimate relationship with such a woman, whomever she might be, is implicit.<sup>9</sup>

Using b-alliteration,<sup>10</sup> verse 11 specifies that the heart of this woman's husband trusts

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<sup>6</sup>For a similar structural arrangement, see Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 248. Garrett's structure agrees with the above structure in that the husband in v. 23 is at the apex of the arrangement; however, Garrett's outer frame around vv. 21-25 seems forced at times. Hawkins agreed with this assessment. See Hawkins, "Meaning and Function," 56.

<sup>7</sup>That v. 10 contains a rhetorical question, cf. Otto Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos*, *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1984), 376; and contra Antonio Bonora, "La donna eccellente, la sapienza, il sapienza," *Rivista Biblica* 36 (April-June 1988), 142. Although she might be difficult to find, Meinhold held that finding her is a possibility. Arndt Meinhold, *Die Sprüche*, *Zücher Bibelkommentare*, vol. 2 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1991), 522.

<sup>8</sup>Compare Pr. 3:15 and Pr. 8:11.

<sup>9</sup>Van Leeuwen asserted that v. 10 reiterates the love language of finding a wife that was so prevalent in Proverbs 1-9. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Proverbs," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 260.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Hawkins, "Meaning and Function," 46.

(בטח) in her.<sup>11</sup> This same root lexeme is present in Pr. 1:33 to denote that the one who listens to Wisdom will dwell in security (בטח). Through this overlapping semantic field, the husband of the Woman of Strength (Pr. 31:11, 12, 23, and 28) and the one who hearkens to Wisdom both share a common security. Common “A-class” assonance also marks verse 11.

Verse 12 also reflects the security that the husband has, and the verse reveals the leitmotif of the pericope--she deals out to him good and not evil all the days of her life.<sup>12</sup> One can easily visualize a pleasant and peaceful scenario for the husband of such a wife, and the Sage Poet forcefully communicates this truth throughout the remainder of the poem. Even though her worth is more than jewels, her husband still benefits in a material fashion (Pr. 31:11b). She is worth more than jewels to her husband, but he still does not go without wealth--he has no lack of gain. This pecuniary persuasion is reminiscent of the riches received by the lovers of wisdom in Pr. 8:17-21.

Three root lexemes provide connection between stanza 1 and stanza 5 in this pericope: אשת (vv. 10 and 30); חיל (vv. 10 and 29); and בעל (vv. 11, 23, and 28). These three lexemes provide an ABC//C’B’A’ inclusio around poem.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The reference to the husband’s heart is not love language. The reference denotes the confidence that the husband has in his wife. See Toy, *Proverbs*, 543. Conversely, Delitzsch noted that the wife’s love for her husband is based on “deep moral grounds” and therefore has “power and purity.” Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon*, vol. 2, trans. M. G. Easton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 328. Aside from whether or not v. 11 is love language, Bonora agreed with this writer by noting that v. 11 could provide an allusion to Pr. 1:33. Bonora, “La donna eccellente,” 144.

<sup>12</sup>Contra Meinhold, *Die Sprüche*, vol. 2, 521, who held that v. 10 provides the theme of the poem.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 522. Also, see Hawkins, “Meaning and Function,” 57.

	A		B		C
<b>Stanza 1</b>	(v. 10) אֵשֶׁת	(v. 10) חֵיל	(v. 11) בַּעַל		
	C'		B'		A'
<b>Stanza 5</b>	(v. 28) בַּעַל	(v. 29) חֵיל	(v. 30) אֵשֶׁת		

The lexeme **בַּעַל** also provides connection with Stanza 3, which shares a common theme with the first and fifth stanzas, and serves to demonstrate the prominence of the husband in this pericope.

All verses in stanza 1 have odd syntax. This anastrophic feature is due to the acrostic nature of the poem and often occurs in the first seven verses of the poem. However, poetic parallelism is more prevalent beginning in verse 17 and following.<sup>14</sup>

### **Stanza 2 (Pr. 31:13-20)**

In these verses, the reader glimpses the amazing deeds of the Woman of Strength. Her industriousness serves as the governing motif of this stanza. She displays diligent attributes in the areas of domesticity (vv. 13, 14, 15, and 19), business dealings (vv. 16 and 18), physical prowess (v. 17), and altruism (v. 20).<sup>15</sup> The structural marker that denotes this stanza is the lexeme **כַּף**. The lexeme occurs in both verses 13 and 20, hence forming an inclusio around this stanza. Also, the only occurrences of **כַּף** in this poem are within this stanza in verses 13, 16, 19, and 20. This repetition highlights both the artisan/working ability that the Woman of Strength possesses and the giving spirit that she possesses as she extends her hand to the poor and needy (v. 20). This extension of her hand in a spirit of generosity is similar to Lady Wisdom's invitational nature in Pr. 1:23-24. While the Woman of Strength extends her hands to the poor and needy, Lady Wisdom stretches out her hand to the foolish (Pr. 1:24).

Within this stanza itself, Bruce Waltke has noted the ABC//A'B'C' lexeme structure in

<sup>14</sup>This study focuses upon structural and syntactical parallelism within the verses at hand; however, for a substantive treatment on thematic parallelism in Pr. 31:10-31 in the Robert Alter vein, see Hawkins, "Form and Meaning," 36-37.

<sup>15</sup>Meinhold noted that vv. 13-18 begin with concrete actions and then turn to more person-oriented actions. Meinhold, *Die Sprüche*, vol. 2, 523.

verses 13-18.<sup>16</sup>

A. כף (v. 13)  
     B. סחר (v. 14)  
         C. לילה (v. 15)  
 A' כף (v. 16)  
     B' סחר (v. 18a)  
         C' לילה (v. 18b)

While verse 17 is noticeably absent from the above structure, no doubt exists as to the fact that a skilled poet organized these verses which highlight the industriousness of the Woman of Strength.

This stanza ends with a chiastic quatrain that revolves around the synonymous terms יד<sup>17</sup> and כף. The quatrain is structured as follows.

A  
 Verse 19 Her-hands she-stretches-out to-the-distaff,  
                     B  
                     and-her-palms they-grasp the-spindle.  
                     B'  
 Verse 20 Her-palm spreads-out to-the-poor,  
                     A'  
                     and-her-hands she-stretches-out to-the-needy.

The quatrain ends the stanza and serves to denote the midpoint of the poem.<sup>18</sup> This poetic feature hearkens back to the first appearance of Lady Wisdom in Pr. 1:20-33 which also has a chiastic quatrain in the center of the pericope (Pr. 1:26-27).

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<sup>16</sup>Bruce Waltke, “Poetics of a Valiant Wife,” SBL--BHP section, Nov. 20, 1999.

<sup>17</sup>Also, the word שלח occurs adjacent to יד in vv. 19 and 20. One of the few commentators who noted this feature was Schökel. See Luis Alonso Schökel, *Proverbios* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1984), 531.

<sup>18</sup>Bonora further supported the fact that v. 20 marks the midpoint of the poem because v. 20 is the eleventh verse of the twenty-two-verse acrostic. Bonora, “La donna eccellente,” 149.

Another structural feature of this chiastic quatrain is the abc//a'b'c' poetic parallelism present in both verses 19 and 20. With this beautiful structure, the Sage Poet ended his first description of the Woman of Strength.

	c	b	a
Verse 19	בְּיָשׁוּר	שְׁלָחָה	יָדָיָהּ
	c'	b'	a'
	פָּלֶךְ	תָּמְכוּ	וּבְפִיָּהּ
	c	b	a
Verse 20	לְעֵנִי	פָּרָשָׁה	כִּפָּה
	c'	b'	a'
	לְאַבְיֹן	שְׁלָחָה	וּיָדָיָהּ

Few rhetorical devices are present in this stanza. “A-class” assonance, however, does occur in verses 14a, 16b, 17a, 19, and 20.

### Stanza 3 (Pr. 31:21-25)

In this stanza, the motif of blessing for those associated with the Woman of Strength is most prominent. The members of her household are clothed and prepared for the threat of snow, she makes clothing for herself and for people to purchase, and her husband is known in the gates. All of these examples demonstrate how association with the Woman of Strength blesses a person.

In a cloaking, structural fashion, the secondary motif of clothing wraps around the apex of this stanza, and the apex is the husband of the Woman of Strength. Although no striking poetic parallelism occurs in this stanza, the stanza has an overall chiastic structure with A and A' elements that provide a Janus link to the preceding and subsequent stanzas. The structure is as follows.

- A No Fear of Snow (גִּלְשׁ - metaphor for future) - 21a  
 B Clothing (לְבָשׁ) - 21b  
 C She makes / linen (עָשְׂתָה / שֵׁשׁ) - 22  
 D Reputation of her husband - 23  
 C' Linen / she makes (סָדִין / עָשְׂתָה) - 24  
 B' Clothing (לְבוּשָׁה) - 25a  
 A' No Fear of the Future (לִי יוֹם אֶחָד) - 25b<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the above structure, “A-class” assonance occurs in verses 21, 22, 24, and 25, thereby further reinforcing the way that the Woman of Strength “cloaks” her husband as a benefactress. This inclusio of assonance envelopes verse 23.

The themes/motifs of this stanza are clothing and how those associated with the Woman of Strength are blessed; however, both the A and A' elements are more descriptive of the Woman of Strength rather than informative of whom she blesses.<sup>20</sup>

Verse 21a provides a further description of the Woman, similar to stanza 2, thereby creating a backward link. Verse 21b serves to explain verse 21a, thereby creating a forward link. The Woman has no fear of the snow for her household (a description of the woman and a backward link) because all of her household members are doubly clothed (a blessing for her household).<sup>21</sup> Since snow rarely occurred in ancient Israel, the snow could metaphorically represent a future threat, and her family is doubly prepared to meet such a threat.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Although this structure was discovered independently, Garrett already has published this basic structure. A few differences, however, do exist between this structure and Garrett's. See Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 248.

<sup>20</sup>Vv. 21 and 25 show that this woman is prepared to meet life's vicissitudes. Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Tyndale, 1964), 183.

<sup>21</sup>Note the clothing motif and the reason that she has no fear of the snow.

<sup>22</sup>Since snow was rare in Palestine, Bonora took this verse to mean the preciousness of the clothes rather than the amount of the clothes. He did not mention the metaphoric interpretation of snow. Bonora, “La donna eccellente,” 149.



Verse 25b also functions in Janus fashion. Since the Woman of Strength is clothed with strength and dignity, verse 25a echoes the clothing motif. Because she is so clothed, she laughs at the future (v. 25b).<sup>23</sup> Verse 25b provides a description of the Woman of Strength, thereby providing a forward link to the next stanza, which also describes this woman. She can laugh at the future because she is clothed with strength and dignity, thereby providing a backward link to the clothing motif of stanza 3.<sup>24</sup> This Janus linking demonstrates the inextricable nature of describing the Woman of Strength and the blessing that she provides to those who associate with her.

The apex of this stanza and the apex of this poem is verse 23, where the husband enjoys a good public reputation. This verse alludes to the *Sitz im Leben* of justice being carried out in the gates of the city in ancient Israel. As in verse 11, b-alliteration is present, thereby connecting verses 11 and 23 (which regard the husband) rhetorically as well as lexically. Even though the Woman of Strength is the predominant character within this pericope, the structure of this stanza, and the structure of this pericope, draws attention to the husband.<sup>25</sup> The Woman of Strength clothes her husband, and the *structure* of this stanza emphasizes that the Woman's action of

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<sup>23</sup>Alden noted that this woman's confidence does not come from wealth or investments. Rather, her confidence comes from right living. Robert Alden, *Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 222.

<sup>24</sup>Toy noted that the woman's strength in v. 25 is social, while in v. 17 her strength is physical. Toy, *Proverbs*, 547.

<sup>25</sup>Garrett held that v. 23 establishes the central message of this pericope, which is that a man needs this type of woman in order to be a success in life. This statement is correct. The question remains, however, Is this type of woman a real person that a young man should look for, or is she primarily a symbol for Wisdom? With her multiudinous expertise, the woman seems superhuman. Could anyone, male or female, attain such a standard in life?

“clothing” is one of the primary reasons that the husband has such a good public reputation.

#### Stanza 4 (Pr. 31:26-27)

This short, two-verse stanza provides the final descriptions of the Woman of Strength. While stanza 2 describes her physical abilities, stanza 4 describes her mental and managerial abilities. By means of a syntactical chiasm, verse 26 relates the wisdom with which this Woman speaks and teaches.<sup>26</sup>

	A	B	
Verse 26	<u>Her-mouth</u>	she-opens <u>in-wisdom</u> ,	
	B'	A'	
	<u>and-the-instruction of-lovingkindness</u> (is) upon <u>her-tongue</u> .		

Roy Zuck argued that this verse demonstrates that the Woman of Strength must be a real person as opposed to the personification of Wisdom. He argued that Wisdom speaking with wisdom makes no sense; therefore, the Woman of Strength must be a wise woman and not Wisdom personified.<sup>27</sup> If this argument is true, how could Wisdom dwell with prudence in Pr. 8:12 unless prudence is another personification? Furthermore, how could sound wisdom belong to Wisdom in Pr. 8:14a, or how could Wisdom either possess understanding or be understanding in Pr. 8:14b?<sup>28</sup> Perhaps one should give the Sage Poet a little “poetic license.” By means of poetic rhetoric, he has demonstrated the pervading nature of wisdom in all areas of life. The Woman, regardless of her identity, both speaks and acts with Wisdom.

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<sup>26</sup>Cf. McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife,” 35. On a different note, Garrett asserted that the wife’s teaching ability makes possible the interpretation that she “sets her husband right” from time to time. In making this statement, Garrett succumbed to his prevailing culture rather than accounting for the historical culture. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 251.

<sup>27</sup>Roy B. Zuck, “Theology of the Wisdom Books,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, Eugene H. Merrill, and Darrell L. Bock (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 237. Zuck’s student, Hawkins, also followed this line of thought. See Hawkins, “Meaning and Function,” 224-5.

<sup>28</sup>See textual note for verse 8:14b in *BHS*, 1285.

Verse 27 reemphasizes the diligent nature of the Woman of Strength in tending to her household.<sup>29</sup> The initial word in the verse, **צוֹפִיָּה**, provides the *tsadhe* line of the acrostic and is the only participle within the poem.<sup>30</sup> Like verse 26, this verse contains a syntactical chiasm in its poetic arrangement (i.e. verb,object//object,verb).

A	B
B'	A'

Verse 27 She-watches-over the-ways (of) her-house,  
and-the-bread (of) sluggishness not she-eats.

This final verse of stanza 4 is a recapitulation and encapsulation of all prior descriptions of the Woman of Strength.

### Stanza 5 (Pr. 31:28-31)

The concluding stanza forms the ending element of the inclusio with stanza 1 by means of the root lexemes **אֵשֶׁת** (vv. 10 and 30), **חֵיל** (vv. 10 and 29), and **בַּעַל** (vv. 11, 23, and 28).

The primary motif of stanza 5 is the blessing of praise, which the lexeme **הָלַל** (vv. 28, 30, and 31) provides. Forming an inclusio, this lexeme is the structural marker for this stanza. Also, similar to **כִּף** in stanza 2, **הָלַל** occurs only within this stanza.

In verse 28, the children of the Woman of Strength rise to bless (**בָּרַךְ**) her, and her husband praises (**הָלַל**) her. Praise and blessing function as synonyms in this verse. In verse 29, either the husband alone or the husband with his children address the Woman of Strength.<sup>31</sup> Although heretofore the Sage Poet employed only the third grammatical person, in stanza 5 he

<sup>29</sup>McCreesh noted that v. 27 could function as a summary statement for the entirety of the woman's activities. McCreesh, 'Wisdom as Wife,' 35.

<sup>30</sup>For further information on **צוֹפִיָּה**, see Al Wolters, "SÔPIYYÂ (Prov 31:27) as Hymnic Participle and Play on *Sophia*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (December 1985): 577-87.

<sup>31</sup>Bonora held that both the husband and the children praised their bride and mother. Bonora, "La donna eccellente," 152.

allowed the husband to speak in praise of his wife. The praise itself appears in verse 29: “Many daughters have done nobly, but-you go-over upon all-of-them!” The use of the second person demonstrates that the verse is a direct address.<sup>32</sup> Further, pleonasmus enriches and intensifies the praise accorded the Woman.<sup>33</sup>

Verse 30 relates the sense of a third person address. While no grammatical indicators demonstrate the third person, the hortatory tone of the verse conveys a larger audience.<sup>34</sup> With this verse, the Sage Poet enlarged the audience by proclaiming through the literary character of the husband that charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman fearing the Lord is to be praised. Because this blessed husband probably would not look at his wife and make a negative statement about personality and physical appearance, the content of this verse seems to indicate a larger audience. If he made such a statement directly to his wife, one could construe that he is implying his wife to be neither charming nor pretty. Courtesy in any dispensation dictates otherwise, and Toy held that one need not understand that the husband despises beauty.<sup>35</sup>

In codaic fashion, juxtaposed with the prefatory fashion of verse 10, verse 31 is the ultimate verse of both stanza 5 and the entire poem. With a large audience in mind, the husband of the Woman of Strength, in the imperative mood, now calls on all who hear his words to give the Woman her due and to let her works praise her in the gates. The construction  $\text{וְיִהְיֶה לָהּ הַלֵּל}$  in verse 31 is phonologically reminiscent of the common phrase  $\text{וְיִהְיֶה לָהּ הַלֵּל}$ , which could indicate the hymnic

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<sup>32</sup>This pericope has no ties to the prophetic tradition; therefore, a shift in person is a noteworthy feature which can indicate a change in audience.

<sup>33</sup> $\text{עַל}$  is not needed in the text because the verb  $\text{עָלָה}$  carries the sense of going up. Literally, v. 29b reads “but you go over/up upon all of them.”

<sup>34</sup>Contra Lichtenstein, who held that v. 30 contains the second person. Lichtenstein, “Chiasm and Symmetry,” 206.

<sup>35</sup>Toy, *Proverbs*, 548.

nature of this pericope.<sup>36</sup>

A type of antanaclasis occurs in verse 31 with the lexeme נתן. In verse 15, the woman gives (נתן) food to her household. In verse 24, she supplies (נתן) belts to the tradespeople. In verse 31, the audience is to give (נתן) the woman her just recompense.<sup>37</sup> Though neither comic nor ironic, this antanaclasis demonstrates the principle of retribution in that the Woman of Strength is to receive what is due her.<sup>38</sup> Of course, the family members of such a woman would be exceedingly proud of their “wife” or “mother.”

A woman of such rapport deserves to be praised and justly recompensed. The ones whom she has blessed could not offer too many accolades. With this thought of public praise, the Book of Proverbs ends in the gates, the same place where the husband of the Woman of Strength enjoys a splendid reputation (Pr. 31:23).<sup>39</sup>

### Conclusions

The overall tone of stanzas 2 and 4 is areligious; however, verse 30 reveals that the Woman of Strength has a strong religious/moral character as well. The Woman of Strength fears the Lord, and she also functions in the practical realm to the benefit of her husband and family. Although the Woman of Strength is the protagonist of this poem, the reader understands that she is a great blessing to her husband.

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<sup>36</sup>Wolters, “SÔPIYYÂ (Prov 31:27),” 579.

<sup>37</sup>For an alternate translation of נתן in Pr. 31:31, see Wolters, “Heroic Hymn,” 449-50.

<sup>38</sup>The nature of this antanaclasis is that the Women of Strength changes from the active agent of the verbal action (vv. 15 and 24) to the passive recipient of the verbal action (v 31).

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Thomas Hawkins, “The Wife of Noble Character in Proverbs 31:10-31,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (January-March 1996): 16; and Diane Bergant, *Israel’s Wisdom Literature: A Liberation Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 93.

This rhetorical analysis has yielded several conclusions. First, the poem is arranged in a five-stanza chiastic structure that highlights the husband of the Woman of Strength in stanzas 1, 3, and 5 (respectively, beginning, middle, and end). An interpreter must account for this feature when interpreting this poem.

Second, the leitmotif of the poem is found in verse 12: she deals out to him good and not evil all the days of her life. The rest of the poem reflects this leitmotif.

Third, the pericope displays an intentional structure at work within the confines of the acrostic. The acrostic feature of the poem denotes the totality of excellence that the Woman of Strength possesses.

Fourth, stanzas 2, 3, and 5 have inclusios to denote their boundaries. The lexeme כף marks the boundaries of stanza 2, and the lexeme הלל marks the boundaries of stanza 5. Although stanza three does not have a repeated lexeme for a marking boundary, the stanza does have a common thematic boundary. In verses 21 and 25, the Woman of Strength has no fear of the snow and no fear of the future, respectively. In fact, the phrases לֹא־תִירָא לְבִיתָהּ מִשֶּׁלֶג (v. 21a) and וְתִשְׁחַק לַיּוֹם אַחֲרוֹן (v. 25b) could form an inclusio of metaphoric synonymy.

Fifth, stanza 4 is an anacephalaeosis for stanza 2. The brief, two-verse stanza 4 is a recapitulative summary for the longer, eight-verse stanza 2.

Sixth, the chiastic quatrain in Pr. 31:19-20 marks both the end of stanza two and the midpoint of the pericope. This feature links Pr. 31:10-31 with the first speech of Lady Wisdom in Pr. 1:20-33, which also contains a chiastic quatrain in the center of the pericope.

Seventh, employing the beauty of form and shape within a clever acrostic, the Sage Poet attempts to persuade readers to seek after such a woman by emphasizing the blessing that she is to all who associate with her. The household of this woman can face future threats with confidence (Pr. 31:21 and 25). Who would not want such security in life? With such a magnificent wife and mother, what would a husband or family member fear? A man would be a “נבל” not to seek such a woman as a life-long companion.

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